BUILDING THE CITY TOGETHER

The Osthang Project
A conversation between:
Cédric Bouteiller (Collectif Etc), Peter Fattinger (Build & Design, TU Vienna),
Suzanne Labourie (MBA, participant of the Osthang Project),
Jan Liesegang (raumlabor), Alexander Römer (Constructlab) and
Yoshiharu Tsukamoto (Atelier Bow-Wow)

The aim of this conversation is to look back on the Osthang and to contrast the movement of participative, experimental building with the idea of self-organized public spaces, or self empowerment in city planning. The Osthang itself is a great example for a public space that has been an important topic for the city planning discourse in Darmstadt after the Second World War but in the same time has been abundant until some people from Darmstadt, and first of all the visionary Kerstin Schultz, head of Darmstadt Architektursommer, have started the initiative to implement new cultural life onto this piece of land. The idea was to start a new bottom-up initiative to reactivate the historically loaded site not only by discussion and planning, but by experimentation and doing. All of the participants of this conversation are involved in different kinds of bottom up activations of public space and public life. We should discuss how these new urban practices can be combined with the top down planning procedures that normally dominate the development of our cities. How can we build the city together? We can recognize a new movement of designers, architects and artists working not only in their studios but on site with their own hands, rediscovering old techniques or trying new ways of craftsmanship: including rapid prototyping, recycling, up-cycling, pre-cycling, and many other techniques. We called that “experimental building”. This is about self-empowerment, reaction to the total separation of planning and building, education, and the joy that appears when we start building together!
Jan: This Osthangel Project, that you all have been part of in one way or another, started from the question: “How should we live together in the future?” I see our conversation today as an opportunity to connect the Osthangel Project with your general practice and ideas. Does “experimental building” sound like a relevant term to you?

Alex: Experimental building, in our practice, is about building together. The question is how to bring together these different moments of a building process, and how to take advantage of the moment of building while still being able to decide on, to design, and to contribute to the final result. My question for the project, which was central as well within the Constructlab team, was how to participate as a team in the collectiveness of the whole project. We had to build the Main Hall, an object, but we were doing it in the context of many different other objects, who were to be considered all together. It is a nice parallel to how we see a collective in general: there are individuals, who are all contributing to a group work. We wanted to contribute to this collectiveness of the camp situation, and it was especially interesting to invite Gonzague to join us, as a Constructlab member and as somebody who would be very transversal through all the other groups. And he did it in a very good way! It was also a very interesting and challenging collaboration with you, Atelier Bow-Wow, to bridge over 20,000 km and to develop a design together with all these different moments of designing, until the very end.

Yoshi: I showed the Osthangel Project on many occasions, at lectures, and people are very interested in this experiment. I see people are looking for this type of experiments. Behind this interest, I think there is a sort of frustration about the activities and behaviours that are casted in the institutionalized space, in the contemporary society. These experimental public spaces are rescuing behaviours from there. I wrote a long essay about my understanding of what is happening today in Japan, in Europe and other countries, entitled “Uninstitutionalized spaces and networks”. Within this writing, I have found that behaviours and skills embedded in our bodies are quite important capitals to share. Alex mentioned collectivity, and I believe it can happen through the means of skills. For crafting things and building architecture, we obviously need some sort of skills that we can teach to or learn from others. It is a learning and teaching process which forms a sort of network, or connection between people. Material can act as another type of means to connect people, because behind the materials, there is someone else who you cannot see, but who processed what you are using. The network produced by the exchange of skills and the flow of materials is a quite important means to create collectiveness as a critique on the fragmented network in the context of globalization accelerated in the 20th century. It is a powerful critique against today’s situation, where people are living in cities that are very much industrialized, especially in the realm of construction. The industry is not only

engineering, it is also economics, politics, law making, and science, who establishes standards for health, security etc. Industry itself is very complex and governs our societies, our living conditions. Experimental public spaces and experimental architecture can criticize the governance of space in the society. Of course these experiments are very small, but through thinking the quality of the network produced by experiments, we can improve the situation.

Jan: I really like the notion of this practice as a criticism. I want to come back on what you said about skills, and ask Etc as well, For me, the way they put their workshop together, with the timetable of two days building, one clay cooking, and one day exploring the city, was very smart. Cédric, is this a general method? Do you always make yourselves these kinds of schedules?

“Normally, construction is more about business, and it is very much specialized by a certain limited type of people. People don’t believe that it is something you can offer to someone.”

YOSHIHARU TSUKAMOTO, ATELIER BOW-WOW

Cédric: I think there is a kind of a contradiction between self-organization, something which in our vocabulary is made without architects, and experimental building, where the aim is the experimentation on building and designing. Collectif Etc is still between one world and the other, between self-organization and the idea that maybe nobody needs architects and our skills are just to be spread and to disappear in self organized communities. The other idea is that, as architects, we have to take this role in society, with our skills and our knowledge, and to draw, to experiment with building, to bring new uses, to give sense, poetry... For us, the Osthangel Project was very new, because generally we work with a community, and we try to find uses with them. In Osthangel, we had the possibility to focus on building, and not on taking care of a community or a project. The aim was, with a temporary community, to invent how we could build. Generally we try to put the building and the architecture in the background. Behind self organization, and other similar values.
Yoshi: The kitchen project was very inspiring for me, because both construction and cooking need certain skills. In your case, both were offered for others. Construction can be a skill that you can offer to someone else. There are very similar aspects between cooking and construction. Normally, construction is more about business, and it is very much specialized by a certain limited type of people. People don’t believe that it is something you can offer to someone. About cooking, people can easily say “I can cook for you, and I offer my skills to your health or your appetite”. But you did both, and it was quite an interesting combination. The skill is something wonderful: the more you cook, the better meals you can produce. It is something that grows, evolves, develop, through the experience. It is very different from money: if you spend money, you lose money. But a skill is growing through its use. It shows a new vision of social capital which is based on skills rather than on money.

Cédric: The experience of the Osthang also was completely new for us, because it was the first time that we really didn’t have plans and let each member of the Etc team drive people to draw and build things. We just let it go, and there was nobody to calculate and be the head of everything. It is the first time that we succeeded in building something which is the closest possible to a collective identity. If we succeed in dividing this power by 10, maybe we can later succeed in dividing it more and more until we have something more spread. We are still working on it, and the Osthang experience was a turning point.

"If you want to improvise, you have to be even better than when it is prepared. We still have a long way to go to be able to improvise architecture!"

CÉDRIC BOUTEILLER, COLLECTIF ETC

THE PAILLA SITUATION

"Cooking at the Osthang was an opportunity to develop many creative solutions. Some arrangements or scenographies were developed in order to create specific atmospheres or unusual recipes, like the mise en place for the traditional German Röstfass, washing potatoes with a brand new toilet brush attached to a drill, the chocolate fondue heated by construction lamps, or a homemade "takie" stand." Susanne Laboute, Osthang Project participant

DESIGN-BUILD STUDIO

The Design Build Studio at Vienna University of Technology, offers students

the opportunity to experience the different stages of a small, but real building project. From the initial design sketch to the developing of models and detailed drawings, all the way through the actual construction process to the final appropriation of the built results. Thence the students are working collaboratively, as a big team, and are collectively bearing the responsibilities and consequences of their actions. The projects range from temporary installations for urban public space in European cities, to permanent buildings for social institutions in South Africa, Indonesia and Austria. www.design-build.at

BEHAVIOROLOGY

Architecture firm Atelier Bow-Wow is famous for its interpretation and use of the concept of Behaviourology in its design work. According to founders Tsushima and Kajima, behaviourology defines architectural expression through the understanding of the complex relationship between people (the inhabitants of a space), the built environment, and urban space. Bow-Wow’s Behaviourology goes further than “form follows function”: it bases form on the behaviour of both the building and natural elements. The study of a building’s articulation, inherent properties of materials such as heat, wind, light, water and the understanding of individual and common human behavior leads to a stronger localized architecture. (Pujun, Ternobu, Bow-Wow, Atelier, & Nango, Yoshikazu. (2010). Architectures of atelier bow-wow. (Rizzoli Inn Public)}
Cédric: If you want to improvise, you have to be even better than when it is prepared. We still have a long way to go to be able to improvise architecture.

Alex: Maybe it is not only a question of improvisation, but also of bringing in the other parts of the whole building process. The engineers, the firemen, people from the municipality, clients in general. It is a different experience to hand something over, or to give people the opportunity to influence it during the process. You all know this situation where the firework comes to the construction site and approves structures to be used by the public. It is in general more easy when you bring that person a first time, a bit earlier, in a non-finished situation, and make him part of the reflexion.

Jan: I want take a chance to ask questions to Suzanne who was a participant of the kitchen group. EtC started not only from this time schedule but also from the grid. I found that this grid, or raster, was very much referring back to the ideas of Constant and of Archigram. Everybody gets this grid as a basic structure and upon it, everybody can do what they want. It is a new idea of the city, where everything is openly negotiated. When they asked you to build this grid, could you relate to that, was it a feeling of freedom?

Suzanne: Not being an architect, I didn’t have any preconceived ideas of what was going to happen, and how it should happen. I never really experienced the constraints of building. Being there consciously as part of an experiment, I would probably have found it not very interesting to stick to a plan. In this case, because of the way EtC prepared it, every day a cycle was happening, and every morning there was a discussion. In this specific setting of the grid combined to the cycle of exploring, building, and cooking, it created these moments where anybody had a chance to say: “What if we did this, or that”, in a setting that otherwise can be scary for someone who is not used to these projects, or just out of school and used to being told what to do. The grid and module model gave way for a new inspiration every day, for a different team building up from what the others had done in the previous days. It allowed us to start anew while trying to understand what the others had done. It worked together with the cycle of cooking and exploring, and gave way for other kinds of thinking. And for more communication in the end.

Cédric: The grid is not a formal way of working, it is the only solution that we found to have an answer to all the structural questions, and the most important materials money would be spent on. The modular solution that can be validated by the structural studies. And you keep the form inside of the modules for the shared moments on the working site. If we had not had the raster, we would have been forced to give it a form, to work on the basic architecture with the participants. It is a sort of escape. It is a starting point, that you then turn into a real project and formal research. Maybe it can only exist when you give only the minimum of form and structure.

Suzanne: If you have a linear plan, logically you start defining tasks and things to do. And for each task, you always have a person who would be the best at doing it, the expert. In this case it would have been you as tutors. It is easier if you do not have a linear plan, but something like this grid and cyclical way of doing, to find a place for people who have varied skills. At Osthung we are talking about people who mainly came from the architecture and design field, but if you do projects in other sectors, with people from different backgrounds, then they can jump in with different ideas and propose side projects that can grow as well, which is great.

Jan: And can we take those self-organized building processes further than just criticism? It is a very good observation that Yoshi put in, that they deal with the frustration of how formalized, industrialized and economized our space production is. People feel there is a lack of liveliness, and they start to do things by themselves. The question lies in the link between the top-down planning, and the bottom-up processes. Do you see projects within your practice where this link is made? Where it is not just about a very specific small space, but it goes towards a different structure that forms some kind of positive statement about how we want to live together? What can we take from these interventionist projects, those new self-organized public spaces, which we can extend into an idea for the city, for something bigger?

Yoshi: At Atelier Bow Wow, we are very interested in these skills embedded into each individual, in using behaviors that are specific to the place and to the community, and in transforming these behaviors or skills into resources for making space and projects. Because skills and behaviours are something shared amongst people, and based on these resources, we can produce space for learning and teaching. This is a very important moment of public space. These experimental public spaces based on each one’s skills like in the forest of the Osthung can be permanent, inviting others who have different skills and human resources. I am now working on a project in Nilgata, in the northern part of Japan, where the space became sort of a translation center of the life of the lagoon we are working on. It is interesting to use the professional skills of farmers and fishermen, those who know the site, to make them interpreters of the place. They work together with nature, so they know very specific types of natural phenomena related to their jobs, which are very hard to experience when you are simply visiting. This learning/teaching process, based on the skills and experiences of locals is one of the directions we can take to develop experimental building, the experimental architecture of a summer school, into more relevant public space projects.

Alex: Speaking a bit more about the frame, in our last ten years of experience, I felt that there was two accesses from bottom-up projects into the top-down procedures. One is coming out of an interpretation, when you are invited for example for an art project, or an art fair, or a theatre’s performance, and you decide to bring it into an urban situation, into something which would normally rather come out of the domain of urban planning. You misuse - in a good way - the means

"SAKATA OBSERVATORY OF LIVES" "We were invited to Nilgata, Japan as part of the Water and Earth Art Festival 2015. We built an observatory tower eight, watching over the lagoon which is listed in the Ramsar convention, a wetland preservation agreement. In order to make this tower, at first we visited the place and made interviews of local people who do farming, fishing, or birdwatching, and who try to demonstrate the value and charm of this lagoon to visitors. There are many different types of people, and they are watching this lagoon from very different perspectives. I found it difficult to make them work together, so I took some distance from them, and built an observation tower to watch them from a little bit higher, on the sand dunes. During this process, I learned many interesting aspects of the nature in this lagoon through the points of view of farmers, fishermen, birdwatchers and community workers. We built this observation tower with materials found in the lagoon. We weaved and piled them to make walls and a roof on the steel scaffolding." - Yosiharu Tsuchamoto, Atelier Bow Wow
and the invitation, in order to tackle questions of urban planning. The other way, that I can observe more in France, is through those calls for applications from municipalities for public projects. They include these kinds of moments in their scenarios more and more often now. So you have specific budgets, specific moments in the project, where they invite, or they address works like what Etx is doing, or what we are doing, or did with Exyz. The urban planner can then use the informations and experimentations gathered from these moments. It is very much related to what you call moments of public concertation, where you get in contact with neighbours and ask them what would they like to have there. In the 70s and 80s, this situation was always a bit the same, somebody who knew something would stand in front of a group of neighbours, and present a project, and then the neighbours could react on it. That may not be the right way to involve most people in such a process, because some people are just not able to speak in public, or usually speak only about what they know. I think the way Yoshi is describing it, going through a collective action, and elaborating skills, and developing something, many more ideas can appear for an urban project.

Jan: You would say there is the start of a shift in the planning culture?

Alex: Sure.

Peter: Also in Austria, the municipalities realized that there is a certain potential in these experimental ways of working, especially within the scope of temporary urban interventions, which aim to activate public space, to facilitate urban appropriation and to benefit the relation between social and spatial matters. I think that is a good shift in the urban planning culture, although, so far, it is basically still stuck in temporary projects. Nevertheless, temporary interventions have the great advantage that a much bigger scope of experimentation is possible, than in the core of permanence. The limited time-frame allows not only a bolder and lighter construction, but also a more intensive and concentrated activity. With temporary installations like Add on or Bellevue we tried to change the perspective on an existing place and question burned-in modes of perception. This way new options can be tested and discussed, and, in the best case, a future development process can get started within an urban district.

Jan: Peter, from my perspective, you are very much experienced with these build and design projects. You showed us how you build real houses with students in a very short time. That was fascinating in the lecture you gave at Osthang. I see this as an alternative building process, that is more and more researched, where the architect is on site, and is involved in the building. This is a very different practice than just sitting in the office sending plans to the engineers and building companies. A few of you also work in bigger scale projects, I wouldn’t know how to apply the skills learned from self-building projects onto big scale developments, where you are confronted with big masses of material and the rigid economical constraints. Earlier in the conversation we already had the idea from Cédric, that we could develop a swarm kind of intelligence to manage big scale building projects. Or are there other ways to make the process as professional and scale up that we can handle to build let’s say: an Opera?

Peter: It is not a problem of not being able to do it physically or technically, it’s much more a problem of convincing investors, NGOs, authorities or simply the administration of the university that you can do it. I think a big group of people can also handle big buildings. It is a lot about this collective experience and energy, and the self-organization within the team. If the group has a common goal they are heading for, they can make a lot happen.

Alex: I think the main hall in Darmstadt was a good example for this, because we had different moments where professional carpentry was involved. We had the engineer’s working with us a bit on site. Maybe they should have been a little bit more often on site! But in this kind of constellation where you generate the framework as well, not in a structural way or in a constructive way but more in the process, it is possible to do bigger projects.

“Education is not only for people, it is also for grown-ups. Not only for the people who receive knowledge and skills, but also for those who give and offer these skills. They discover themselves through this process.”

YSOHARU TSUKAMOTO, ATELIER BOW-WOW

EXYZT

“Be utopian! We want to build new worlds where fiction is reality and games are new rules for democracy. If space is made by dynamics of exchange, then everybody can be the architects of our world and encourage creativity, reflection and to renew social behaviour.

Experiment Architecture can expand into a multidisciplinary game where everyone brings his own tools and knowledge to contribute to a collective piece. We do refuse to enter the current architectural practice which serve the building industry. We do deal with the reality of construction. We design, build and live our constructions and trust the freedom for visitors to appropriate our projects. We produce an open source architecture that offer an access to basic public amenities and a place for exchange: A physical framework for a direct and immediate emulation between people and space. We wish to invite anyone to re-appropriate and get involved with his own social and physical environment,” www.exyzt.org, 06-10-2015

ADD ON

20 meters high temporary installation, Peter Failing, Veronika Orso, Michael Ripper and students of the Design-Build Studio at Vienna University of Technology, Vienna, 2009

BELLEVUE

The yellow house, temporary installation, Peter Failing, Veronika Orso, Michael Ripper, Linz, 2009

Picture by Florian Mayr

Picture by Peter Failing

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"If we think of this movement that develops from a network and has a potential to grow and really change society, we need to open up a lot, (...) we need to get into these other professional networks"

JAN LIESEGANG, RAUBLABOR

Peter: It is very necessary to generate the right framework for projects like these. The involvement of professionals is also indispensable, especially if you want to scale up projects. In our projects, retired professionals often join in as volunteers. They have a great knowledge and are happy to pass it over to young, committed people. Generally nowadays there are many people with various backgrounds, who want to use their spare time to get involved in collective hands-on projects. So there is a big potential to channel all these energies.

Cédric: One thought about self-organization. It is about who we want to work for, and who we choose to work with, as architects. We are more and more often working for cities that want to try out bottom-up processes. They want to know what is happening on the ground, what people think and what they can do, with their hands. Sometimes, we start working with the city and end up working with a small community, giving them power and space to develop themselves. Sometimes, the contrary happens, we work with a small association and end up in the town council. This inversion is really possible, you think that you work on bottom-up processes, but it actually goes up, and down, and up again.

Peter: I understand what you mean, that is also the point in many of our projects, which are often self-initiated. We come up with an idea and try to involve other partners like NGOs, the community, the city council, the university and students. We do not really know in the beginning where and with whom we will end up finally. It is sometimes a long process, and you have to invest a lot of time and energy, having neither an official assignment, nor an actual client beforehand. But it is worth starting this process, and bring the activity to a certain point where it gets visible and touchable. This makes it much easier to inspire others to also become part of it and make it happen.

Yoshi: Based on my experience, if we can translate these types of activities into educational activities, it becomes much easier for municipalities to receive and authorize them.

Peter: Yes, through the educational aspect these activities can get expanded a lot. Involving students in the projects always works as an amazing multiplier.

Yoshi: And education is not only for young people, it is also for grown-ups. Not only for the people who receive knowledge and skills, but also for those who give and offer these skills. They discover themselves, the value of the space and the value of the profession through this process.

Jan: If we think of this movement that develops from a network and has a potential to grow and really change society, we need to open up a lot, we need some economists, engineers, we need to get into these other professional networks. The crossover and of course the money part, they should also be dealt with. Otherwise, we cannot get out of the perspective of criticism, or sometimes romanticism.

Alex: Within Constructlab, we are thinking a lot about what it means to be a collective, and what we came up to is something which works very well in German, the "Interessenagemeinschaft". It refers to a group of people who share the same interest in doing things in a certain way, which is very inclusive, and not exclusive. I think "collective", sometimes, as a word, has a certain connotation in the daily life, which is practiced for example much more by Etc than by Constructlab. A better explanation or denomination of this kind of blurry community of people, is that they actually share the same interest, which is joining again Yoshi's reflections about sharing skills. In these kind of groups, you are also interested in learning from the others. You put your own knowledge in it, your specialization, but you also help out your colleagues, and you go into one direction together.

Cédric: I think there is really an etymological research to do. In France, the movement that we are talking about, that is not very defined, but we are talking about the same images, is called "the collectives", in French "les collectifs". All professionals from the fields of architecture or urbanism, when they talk about "les collectifs", they talk about our practices.

Yoshi: The building, experimental architecture is an opportunity to construct people. If you don't participate in these kind of activities, you are anyways consciously constructed, casted in a certain way, through the system of industrialization. If you want to cast yourself with your wishes and your ideas, it is an important process to participate in these kind of activities.

Cédric: Build yourself!